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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000664

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND PHILIPPINE ARMED FORCES CHIEF OF
STAFF DISCUSS SUCCESSES, REMAINING CHALLENGES

REF: A. MANILA 521 (ANTI-ARROYO PROTESTS LACK CRITICAL

MASS)

[1](#)B. MANILA 426 (POSSIBLE REMAINS OF TERRORIST
DULMATIN)

[1](#)C. MANILA 360 (EMBASSY WORKING TO KEEP BALIKATAN ON
TRACK)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney for Reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador and Philippine armed forces chief General Hermogenes Esperon, Jr. met privately on March 13, broadly discussing successes during Esperon's tenure. They also addressed some key challenges, including locating remaining high-value terrorists, maintaining an apolitical posture among security forces as critics maneuver against the Arroyo administration, ensuring the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front continues, and evaluating how U.S.-Philippine military cooperation can deepen and continue to provide mutually valuable results. Esperon reiterated his gratitude for U.S. support in the fight against terrorism and in assisting the Philippine Armed Forces to implement reform efforts. Looking forward, Esperon said he was proud of the direction the Philippine military was taking and that new cadets were exhibiting a degree of professionalism that bodes well for the future of the country. END SUMMARY.

PRESSING THE FIGHT, PROMOTING PEACE

[1](#)2. (C) During a private breakfast on March 13, the Ambassador and Philippine Chief of the Armed Forces General Hermogenes Esperon, Jr. discussed the need to sustain the pursuit of high-value terrorists in southern Mindanao. Esperon said he hoped the results from the DNA analysis of the suspected remains of Bali bomber Dulmatin (ref B) would be known soon, but Esperon noted that regardless of the outcome, it was important that strong momentum against terrorists is continuing. Discussing the recent change of command on Jolo island, Esperon expressed firm support for Marine Brigadier General Juancho Sabban, who took command of the combined Philippine forces on Jolo in March. Sabban, Esperon said, was the right choice to close the gap in tracking down the remaining high-value terrorists concentrated on the mountainous island. The Ambassador concurred, saying that the USG stood ready to assist the Philippine forces as needed, including continued civil-military projects.

[1](#)3. (C) Esperon remarked that he had spent many years posted to Jolo island earlier in his career and that he had seen

many successes there. The real difference, Esperon said, was that in previously completely destitute areas, people now had hope for a better life through improved infrastructure and economic opportunity, which he credited to U.S. assistance. This opportunity, he continued, was essential to promoting stability and achieving durable peace accords with the Muslim insurgents of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Moro National Liberation Front. Esperon said he believed that both the insurgents and the military had tired of decades of fighting and that both sides support the peace process.

MILITARY NOT PLAYING POLITICS

14. (C) Esperon said that he was proud of the conduct of the Philippine military and police during the recent protests against the Arroyo administration (ref A). Esperon said he believed the security forces had turned a corner in their ability to handle large demonstrations without incident. Although the police were under tremendous pressure during the protests held in Manila, Esperon emphasized that the demonstrations showed that people could express their opinions in a peaceful manner while the police and military upheld their responsibility to ensure public order. Despite some media rumors that the military would act extraconstitutionally during the protests, Esperon said responsible decisionmakers did not share that concern, citing prominent business leaders who had called him to offer their support during the rallies and to compliment the exemplary behavior of the police and military.

BILATERAL EXERCISES VALUABLE

15. (C) Esperon agreed with the Ambassador that the recent

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Balikatan joint U.S.-Philippine military exercise was a success, despite early difficulties in Mindanao with a small minority of critics, who sought to portray the exercise as a hostile combat operation against Muslim populations (ref C). During Balikatan, U.S. and Philippine military personnel treated more than 12,000 patients in the southern Philippines alone in medical, dental, and veterinary civil affairs projects, and had completed 27 engineering projects as well.

16. (C) Esperon commented that, generally, field training components of Balikatan and other annual exercises, which take place outside of Mindanao, draw little attention from the media or critics. As part of planning next year's Balikatan, Esperon said he had instructed his Philippine Balikatan chairman to explore ways to mitigate expected negative publicity well in advance of all future bilateral exercises, not just Balikatan. The Ambassador agreed and said the Embassy similarly was looking at how to package the range of activities during our bilateral exercises to ensure that they continue to provide the most valuable outcomes for both countries. Esperon thanked the Ambassador for U.S. assistance in all areas. Esperon concluded by saying that while we must continue to think creatively about how to engage those few who attempt to derail the U.S.-Philippine relationship, 95 percent of the Philippine population is strongly pro-American.

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KENNEY